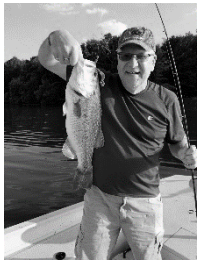
The "End" of Seminary Education: Healthy and Flourishing Congregations

William Utech

Abstract

Historically, most American seminaries have not been overly or overtly concerned with the health and well-being of the congregations that receive their graduates as pastors. This lack of concern was born of these seminaries being founded under "Christendom," wherein the dominant culture of the country affirmed and supported Christianity and her institutions. For seminaries, this meant a guaranteed "market" for their graduates. In these post-Christendom times, that luxury is gone, and seminaries must get better at raising up leaders who will shepherd congregations toward health and vitality.

It was my joy, honor, and privilege to serve from 1996 to 2013 on the faculty of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. During those seventeen years, I taught hundreds of great students, and I got to know and appreciate my faculty colleagues, who are not only some of the smartest men in their fields of expertise, but also some of the wisest men I've ever met. But it was during the 2007 academic year, after I had completed my doctoral work on the philosophy of theological education, that I began to experience what others have called "a holy discontent." I became discontented with the way formation for pastoral ministry was happening in North American seminaries, including at Concordia. I could not get over the fact that even though our institution was well-respected in our church body, generously supported by a growing donor base, and reaccredited every ten years by the Association of Theological Schools, so many congregations in our church body that our graduates served continued to slide into decline, crisis, sometimes chaos, and oftentimes, closure. What is the goal of seminary education and formation for ministry if not a church body comprised of healthy and flourishing congregations?[1] That was my question, and it dogged me for another half-dozen years until I left the faculty to become the Mission Executive for the Minnesota South District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.



For over 35 years William Utech has served church and world as pastor, seminary professor, and district mission executive by preaching, teaching, presenting, and writing in ways that encourage pastors, leaders, and congregations to think, plan, and act in missional ways, so that they are able to break free from old and unhelpful status quos, and move, more and more, toward health, vitality, and starting new ministries that reach new people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Seven years later, and much to my surprise, I was one of forty men nominated for the Office of President at Concordia Seminary and was asked by the search committee to reflect on the philosophy of seminary education. In doing so, my old "holy discontent" returned, which is why I have written this essay, and why I begin by quoting an article written some years ago by Frederick Schmidt:

"Our seminaries are dying and the Master of Divinity degree has been discredited. Will we make the necessary changes to better prepare leaders for the Church, or will we limp and wander into the future?"[2]

With this shocking statement and challenging question, Schmidt begins his critique of the state of seminary education and pastoral formation in the United States today. He is alarmed! He notes the growing number of denominational officials and congregational members who argue that attending seminary may actually be detrimental to the formation of effective leaders for the Church. He notes the large number of mainline seminaries that are selling their buildings and property, cutting faculty, and eliminating programs. He notes how theological schools compete over a shrinking pool of prospective students, and how they must rely more and more on scholarships and lower their academic standards in order to attract students.

Though the reasons for this crisis are both numerous and long-standing, Schmidt argues that two primary factors stand out as responsible for the current situation. The first is a loss of focus on the mission of preparing *pastors*. Schmidt puts it this way:

> In the quest for academic respectability, seminaries have not always remembered that preparing clergy was the mission and lifeblood of their institutional life. Some have focused on preparing scholars, which though essential, is secondary to its primary ministry of preparing new generations of spiritual leaders. Some have prepared students who lacked the practical skills to effectively lead a congregation. Others have produced students who were so poorly grounded in the Christian faith that they lacked the necessary spiritual formation to be effective.[3]

The second factor is a disconnect between what congregations of the church need and what the faculty desire to deliver. Too often, Schmidt observes, seminary faculty members have "indulged their academic interests, creating both classes and curricula that correspond with their research issues and academic agenda but don't necessarily speak to the basic and perennial needs of the church's ordained ministry."[4]

The Crisis in Theological Education

How a theological institution's focus and faculty need to be aligned to provide faithful and effective pastors, missionaries, and leaders[5] for the church, then, is a primary focus of this paper. At the outset, we must remember that we did not get here overnight. The crisis in theological education has been brewing for over two generations, and many in the church (including in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod) are concerned about it. They note that the United States is the third largest

mission field in the world, not just because of all the immigration over the past thirty-five years, but even more because the Anglo population of the country is becoming more and more disconnected from the church. They quote poll numbers that indicate how on any given weekend only 18 percent of the US population attends a Christian worship service, and they conclude that the mission field is our own moms and dads, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, neighbors, classmates, coworkers, and even our enemies. The mission field is no longer only overseas but is now in our living room.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) has not been immune to any of this. One of the most impactful trends in the LCMS is the decline in attendance in many congregations and schools. For many years, over 50 percent of LCMS congregations have not baptized or confirmed a single adult in the past year,[6] and 80 percent or more of all LCMS congregations report no growth in annual worship attendance.[7] More people are dying or dropping out than are being brought in.

The causes of this are, to be sure, numerous. Primary among them is the reality that American culture is now "post-church" or "post-Christendom."[8] Americans are no longer paying attention to the old mainline denominations that once held a privileged and influential spot in American society. The paradigm for how the church needs to be the church in this country has thus shifted, and every denomination and congregation that cannot or will not adapt to the new paradigm eventually loses its "market share" of adherents. It could be said that the old business adage, "adapt or die," is exactly what is happening to thousands of Christian congregations across the country that are unwilling and/or unable to be the true church in ways that post-church paradigm people can actually see, hear, understand, be influenced by, or be drawn toward.

A major reason the church in America has been caught flat-footed and unprepared for this unprecedented post-church paradigm shift is that seminaries have failed to prepare pastors for leading congregations into this brave new post-church world. How have they failed? George Barna has identified two faulty assumptions as major contributors. In his 1998 study, *The Second Coming of the Church,* he argues that it has long been assumed that if a pastor is a good enough teacher, that gift will compensate for mediocre leadership. "But Americans," Barna counters, "need to be led. Assuming that decent teaching without good leadership can adequately direct people's spiritual paths and personal lives is the recipe for disaster that has permitted the Church to lose its influence and impact."[9] He also notes that it has long been assumed that a qualified pastor should have a seminary degree. Barna's response to this assumption is both lengthy and harsh:

> The built-in assumption, of course, is that seminaries recruit godly people who are called to full-time ministry service and possess great leadership potential, then train them to be competent church leaders, awarding the degree as a credential of fitness to lead people in their spiritual journey.
>
> In reality, seminaries do nothing of the kind. They remove seminarians from the real world for several years and put them through an academic exercise in which they are taught how to

> exegete Scripture and teach. Those are important and necessary skills for the Church, but they are not synonymous with leadership. Consequently, both churches and pastors are set up for failure and disappointment.[10]

Barna is not alone. Many American Christians have expressed concern with the state of the church and its pastors, and thus the state of the theological institutions that form pastors for ministry. Indeed, when reliable research finds that "formal theological training has a negative correlation to both church growth and overall quality of churches,"[11] one cannot deny that the concern is founded.

In the past, when American culture was a "churched" culture, seminaries were generally held in high regard because they met the needs of their constituents. Every denomination had a school that trained its pastors for service in its congregations. Seminaries enjoyed a guaranteed "market" for their "product." As institutions, they thus enjoyed the luxury of being mostly immune to outside criticism. But as Christendom has waned in the United States, Christian congregations across denominations have plateaued, and church membership has declined.

Over the last four decades or so, this decline has precipitated the production of literature dedicated to analyzing, debating, and critiquing seminary education. Meanwhile, congregations served by graduates of these seminaries have, for the most part, continued to decline in almost every measurable way. Institutions of theological education in America should take note of this because most were born of healthy and flourishing congregations, judicatories, and denominations. And because the health of these same denominations, judicatories, and congregations continues to wane, as they have been for the past forty years, it is only a matter of time before the seminaries themselves suffer (if they are not already suffering) the same institutional fate.

In Genesis 41, Pharaoh dreams of seven cows, sleek and fat coming out of the Nile River. As these fat cows graze contentedly among the reeds, seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, come up out of the Nile after them, and stand beside them on the riverbank. And then the ugly, gaunt cows eat up the seven sleek, fat cows. The meaning of this dream was that a time of great ease and abundance would be followed by a time of hardship and famine, and the years of deprivation would be so severe that they would devour everything produced during the years of plenty. There is a lesson here, it seems, for seminary leaders and faculty members: The years of ease and abundance are over.

The healthy and flourishing Christian congregations that banded together to form most American seminaries have not remained healthy and flourishing. They can no longer support theological education institutions as they once did. Many no longer even desire to. As for the seminaries that have for generations been living off the riches of healthy and flourishing congregations, they shall experience institutional hardship and famine like never before. They need the support of the congregations they serve in order to survive, but all they have left are skinny cows!

The situation is, to be sure, complex. Yet questions about what seminaries do and how they do it, along with the long-standing criticisms and critiques that arise from disparate corners of the church, remain and must be taken seriously. These questions and concerns continue to be directed at the mission/focus of Christian seminaries in America and at the faculties that serve them. What follows is a representative sample of these criticisms from a spectrum of credible sources and in chronological order, spanning from 1964 to the recent past.

• "The crisis in theological education has arisen largely because the theological schools and the religious professionals find themselves more and more on the periphery of this fundamental conversation which is the mission and ministry of the church."[12]

• "The outcome of biblical studies in the academy is a trained incapacity to deal with the real problems of actual living persons in their daily lives."[13]

• "The fourfold pattern [of most seminary curricula], lacking any material unity of subject matter and norm, is responsible for one of the main elements taken for granted in present-day theological education: the independence and autonomy of the department areas, disciplines of the theological school. And because this promotes these areas as independent clusters of scholarship, it alienates them from both personal life and the church."[14]

• "We believe that as a result of the current confusion, much of the time and energy given to theological education is misdirected. Although we rejoice in the teaching of the Bible and church history, we believe that it is too much geared to interest in disciplinary scholarship and too little to the real needs of the church."[15]

• "Theological seminaries were originally chartered to prepare people to serve as parish pastors. Most Protestant congregations were organized to evangelize, to gather people together for the proclamation of the Word, for the administration of the Sacraments (ordinances), and to nurture the spiritual journey of people including children. Rarely were they organized to provide employment for the clergy."[16]

• "The natural evolution in self-image from a professional school to that of a graduate school also produces changes in the criteria for selecting members of the faculty. Gone are the days when a majority of the faculty were ministers who had spent fifteen or twenty years as parish pastors before joining the seminary faculty. The demand today is for scholarship, not parish experience. It is difficult to find a theological seminary today in which even one-third of the faculty have spent at least seven years as the senior minister of a congregation averaging seven hundred or more at worship. By contrast, it is rare to find the surgery department in a medical school staffed by persons who have not performed hundreds of complex surgical procedures."[17]

• "Modern scholarship seems to have given insufficient attention to the fact that in the first half of the nineteenth century American theologians were first preachers and pastors. We have tended, perhaps, to observe them through a twentieth-century lens that has detached theology from the pulpit, rather than through and eighteenth-century lens that typically combined preaching, the ministerial office, and the teaching of theology."[18]

• "The churches thought of seminaries as training schools for preachers. The larger academic culture with the rise of the culture of professionalism and modern research universities, saw seminaries as graduate schools with a theological specialization. The divide is now so wide that no single institution can serve both of these masters. Most have attempted a middle way, between the two publics, but with mixed results."[19]

• "The loss of the mainline churches in membership and the decline seen in other quantifiable data indicate that something is seriously wrong. The seminaries have to face the question of whether or not they are educating people with the ability to go out and build churches."[20]

• "[Seminary] teachers are also mostly separate from the sphere of public ministry. Instead of being theologically formative practitioners they are at best exemplary models of theological formation or professional exponents of practical theology. Their students are not coworkers in ministry whose learning is further stimulated through active service, but at best good novices gaining untested tools for future service. In such a setting, problems of relating the subjective and objective aspects of learning are bound to arise."[21]

One could address these observations, critiques, and complaints by treating them lightly, ignoring, or dismissing them altogether. After all, finding fault with seminaries and their graduates has been a regular armchair sport of the church for as long as these seminaries have been around, and, truth be told, congregations and judicatories can be quite myopic when it comes to thinking about best practices for forming pastors for ministry. As Linda Cannell observes,

> A commonly suggested antidote to the perceived problems of today's church is to develop leaders who know how to manage an organization and who communicate in an appealing fashion from the pulpit. As necessary as it is to have someone in a congregation who can assist with organizational matters, the more urgent need is for leaders who are able to assist congregations to understand and live out their identity as the people of God in the world.
>
> Today seminaries are under pressure from denominational leaders and congregations to train better leaders. However, the nature and role of leadership is distorted when churches seek to be successful or efficient rather than being the people of God. Churches seeking strong leaders who can create successful churches should

> always be unhappy with the products of seminaries. Churches who are simply seeking pastors who can function well (in preaching, teaching, relationships, office management) should likewise be unhappy with the products of seminaries. The seminary, as a functioning community of scholars, should provide assistance to the church as it seeks to embrace more biblically consistent understandings of leadership. Where there is lacking, the answer is not to create church-based seminaries *for the purpose of* creating strong leaders for successful churches. Nor is the answer for seminaries to enhance and enlarge functional aspects of the curriculum in order to develop the pastoral skills that many churches want. If the church has departed from the most basic descriptions of its character and purpose in Scripture, leaders will be in the undesirable position of trying to make an organization work that has departed from its function. [22]

Thus, the best approach for forming pastors for effective ministry does not consist of simply giving church folk what they say they want. Neither, however, does it mean ignoring their concerns about the states of their congregations, or about what they observe is wrong with seminaries and seminary education. Instead, the numerous and persistent observations, critiques, and complaints, as set forth above, should be viewed by seminary leaders and faculties as the full-blown arrival of the seven skinny cows on their campuses. If these numerous and gaunt bovines are not taken seriously—if something does not change for the better—they will devour every remaining resource the seminary has stored up from the years of ease and abundance. Given this state of affairs, what must seminaries now do?

Reenvisioning Theological Education

Robert Banks has articulated the need for a major re-thinking of theological education toward what he calls a "missional model." In *Reenvisioning Theological Education*, he reviews key themes in the current debates and examines how ministry formation took place during biblical times. This is the foundation for his model, which he then develops with the goal of providing a range of practical ways in which theological schools might move their present patterns of theological education in more holistic, practical, and especially missional directions.

In his investigation of the Scriptural material regarding the way in which theological formation took place during Bible times, he notes the following:

> There were, then, different levels and different circles within which formation for ministry took place in the biblical writings. Alongside the fundamental role played by the family and later by the school, and the largely nonformal preparation of village elders, there were the more specialized circles of priests, prophets, and the

wise. For all their differences these often exhibit some common elements:

• The main purpose of associating with a key figure was to collaborate in the active service of God.
• Associates of this figure attended or accompanied him, in some cases living with or near him.
• This involved a permanent or temporary break with their normal relationships and surroundings.
• Learning occurred in diverse settings through participant observation, nonformal discussion, action-reflection, and direct instruction.
• In some cases, successors emerged when the central figures passed on, whereas in others this was a by-product of the association.[23]

Important to remember is that in all this, Banks stresses that when Jesus chose the disciples, it was not preparation of the Twelve *for* mission that was uppermost in His mind, but *engagement* of the Twelve *in* mission.

All this has ramifications for the way in which a seminary should go about its business of theological education:

• It ought to comprehend the broader people of God not just as an elite cadre, though special attention should be paid to a core group and, to a lesser extent, to an intermediate group.
• It should orient itself primarily around "in-service" ministry activities, within which intellectual, spiritual, and practical concerns form a seamless whole.
• At its center should be a living and working partnership with an experienced person who, for different periods of time, offers his or her whole self to those in such a group.
• The break with home, occupation, and often family, involved in attending a seminary, or the residential requirements in extension centers, mirrors something of what we find in the biblical narratives. So does the general development of residential campuses, extension centers, and continuing education or distance-learning programs.
• The growing desire to have a stronger interconnection between the seminary and the church, and between study and practice, is well based.
• In a limited way echoes of Paul's collegial approach appear in the one-on-one or small-group academic mentoring of advanced students, who are regarded as junior members of the community of scholars.[24]

This "missional model" of theological education places the main emphasis for the student on hands-on partnership in ministry based on interpreting the Christian tradition and reflecting on practice with a strong spiritual and communal dimension. "On this view theological education is primarily though not exclusively concerned with actual *service*—informed and transforming—of the kingdom and therefore primarily focuses on acquiring cognitive, spiritual-moral, and practical obedience."[25]

Turning from the students' to the faculty's role, Banks reminds this group that as it was for Jesus with His disciples, so it must be for them. "It is through the sharing of a person's life as well as their beliefs that life-giving change comes to others," Banks notes. "Truth must be embodied as well as articulated, incarnated as well as revealed."[26] Therefore, central to this program is that those who lead and teach all live in the context of ministry, exercising their gifts both in churches and in the community. In this way they become role models for students of what to do and think, of practice as well as understanding. In other words, they incarnate their teaching in concrete service.

Banks' missional model of theological education thus calls for theological schools to (1) Induct students into a set of practices—intellectual, personal, and vocational—that will stand them in good stead for whatever God calls them to do and help them to do this creatively and appropriately; (2) Help students form a set of attitudes at the center of which is a hunger for reality in their relationship with God, self, and others, as well as in their ongoing work, and an ability to build community inside and outside the church; (3) Work to build a strong foundation for these practices and attitudes that are made up of a genuine understanding of the Christian tradition—biblical, historical, and theological—without which there is no base for the other two. These practices, attitudes and understandings will be most tightly woven together "through *learning-in-ministry* rather than *learning-for-ministry* or *learning-alongside-ministry*. A missional approach to theological education gives to all three the sharpest focus, and brings them into contact with one another in the most vital way. It is like the difference between merely studying a play, reading it together as an exercise, and actually rehearsing and presenting it on stage. While the first two both have their part to play, participants gain most from them when they are working towards an actual production."[27]

Reenvisioning Theological Education goes a long way toward addressing the disparate positions within the debate over the crisis in theological education and bringing them together in a coherent way. When and where faculty are engaged in real-world, real-time mission and ministry with students, true ministerial formation takes place, because all are actually engaged in the Commission to which the Lord of the church calls all of the church. This central missional focus will also be more likely to address the fragmentation in theological education than all of the other options for doing so that this body of literature presents—for when teachers and students are

engaged in mission, they give more of themselves to the task yet simultaneously learn to rely less on their own expertise and more on God than ever before.

Because what people tend to learn most is what the culture of an institution cultivates rather than what teachers teach, the missional model of theological education holds real promise for honest-to-goodness educational reform. The Spirit is always active where Christians are engaged in mission, and that has the potential to change the culture of even those schools that are least open to institutional change.

So then, given all of this, what might theological schools like those in our fellowship do going forward? Here are four sanctified suggestions:

Accept (at least some) responsibility

The situation is complex with many facets and faces, but seminaries have been given the primary responsibility for preparing and certifying pastors. Between 1996 (when I was first called to the faculty of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri), and 2013 (when I left the faculty to become a mission executive), my faculty colleagues and I sent out approximately ninety graduates per year to serve as pastors in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. In other words, during my seventeen years as a teacher of future pastors, I saw approximately 1,500 Concordia graduates enter the LCMS ministerium as (in most cases) pastors of local congregations. Throughout this same time frame, unfortunately, the LCMS continued to decline in baptized membership, confirmed membership, average weekend attendance, and overall number of member congregations. While there are many reasons for this ongoing decline, certainly the Seminary needs to own at least part of the responsibility. Spiritual and/or numerical growth always happens by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Means of Grace. But pastors, it is argued, are stewards, or means, of the Means of Grace. Thus, when and where spiritual and/or numerical decline has become the general state of affairs, it can and will be argued that the church's leaders—her pastors—are not being as effective means of the Means of Grace as the church needs them to be.

This is how God's people see it: They look at the statistics and wonder what's broken. They see a seminary adding 1,500 pastors to the clergy roster of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod over a seventeen-year period, and over that same time frame they see all the "people" numbers continue to decline. It should come as no surprise, then, that criticisms will be leveled at that seminary's ministerial education and formation processes.[28]

As noted above, these criticisms are not unique to Concordia, the LCMS, or even American Lutheranism. Concerned Christians have been raising them for some time! It is high time, therefore, for seminaries and the churches that support them to own a portion of the responsibility for the current state of Christian congregations in North America. They must pledge to do whatever it takes to fix what can be fixed in timely, measurable ways. This is the *only* way their efforts at institutional change will be taken seriously.

The primary institutional focus of every seminary must be healthy and flourishing congregations

In other words, the "end product" of a seminary's formation for ministry program has to be more than "a really good guy." It has to be healthy and flourishing congregations. Really good students, really good graduates, and really good assignments/placements of graduates into churches are not enough. They are helpful, and usually necessary, but they are not enough, because a seminary's realm of responsibility and accountability now needs to extend way beyond these factors. At the end of every academic year, in a clear and public accounting to the church it serves, a seminary now must be able to point out to the church-at-large in clear and unambiguous ways how, where, and to what degree the congregations its graduates are serving are actually better off, healthier, and more flourishing congregations.

This ecclesial paradigm of seminary formation for ministry is directly related to the purpose of the church. Its focus is on the formation and transformation of congregations, and its outcome is to support and renew worship, community, and mission. In this way, theological education is in the business of helping the church to be more faithful as a People of God, more spiritual as a Body of Christ, and more incarnational as the Spirit's Temple. Linda Cannell further explicates the rationale behind this approach to seminary education:

> First, the nature, identity, and purpose of the church constitute the starting point. Second, theological education is concerned with the formation and transformation of the church (i.e., the primary focus is not on the development of the students as potential and present leaders of the church, but on the development of the church). Third, theological education is an extension of the church's teaching ministry. Fourth, ecclesial theological education is an alternative to both the academic and clerical approaches to ministry development. Most notably, the ecclesial paradigm posits that the Christian community is fundamentally responsible for the educational task, not individual theologians. Theologians are not removed from the process, but they work in dialogue with the ecclesial community, as part of it . . . [29]

Adopt and implement a missional curriculum that encourages and rewards learning-in-ministry

Here Robert Banks's *Reenvisioning Theological Education* comes back into the picture as a resource for providing a blueprint toward institutional reform. Latching onto the formation for ministry practices of Jesus, Banks asks,

> Is it really possible to develop a capacity for action that is abstracted from engaging in action? Action will be devalued as a route to learning so long as it is only talked about and not engaged in. . . . It must become part of the circle of theological reflection, and such reflection has greater

> depth when one is actively involved. . . . So long as theological reflection is not an organic part of the whole curriculum, the dichotomy between theory and practice remains partially in place.[30]

For a missional learning-in-ministry curriculum to succeed, however, seminary faculty must have more exposure to certain ministry or mission situations. While the typical rank-and-file member of a theological faculty may prefer to be oriented primarily toward academic undertakings, it is now essential that he be encouraged and rewarded to gain greater ministry or mission experience. The ways in which faculty could develop their skills as reflective practitioners are numerous, and Banks provides a list of examples,[31] from becoming part of a pastoral or ministry team in a local church to teaching and researching in a developing world college, from working with a community-oriented group in an urban setting to helping plant a church in a new area or population group, from living for a time among the poor, marginal, or disadvantaged in one's own city to serving as a Christian consultant to a business or other market-place institution.

Again, as Banks asserts,

> In the long term, there is need for more than an immersion or short-term experience of mission. This has most force when it is an enduring and integral dimension of a person's teaching, and is valued and regarded by their institution as much as research—indeed, when it is demanded as part of their *intellectual* contribution. Such involvement broadens and deepens our understanding of our culture, raises issues that require serious reflection, and forces us to find new resources from the Christian tradition. It should also become an essential part of theological institutions' wider *social* and *cultural* mission.[32]

Choose deep change instead of slow death

Every seminary is responsible, to a certain degree, for the health and vitality of the congregations its graduates serve. American Christianity is in decline, and if theological schools do not soon take steps to reinvent themselves in ways that redress this decline, these same schools will descend, irrevocably, into irrelevancy, and the church will find new approaches for identifying, forming, and calling her next generation of pastors. The important choice that confronts all of these seminaries, therefore, is the choice between deep change and slow death.[33]

According to organizational behavior and human resource management expert, Robert Quinn, organizations (like seminaries) are based on systems of external and internal expectations. *External* expectations are the product that the organization's external constituency demands from the institution and may have even instituted the organization to provide in the first place. *Internal* expectations are the formal and informal routines, procedures, rules, and/or regulations that the organization devised for itself to make itself efficient and/or effective in providing the product that the external constituency demands. As time goes by, however, the organization's

(seminary's) routine patterns move it toward decay and stagnation. The organization (seminary) loses alignment with the changing, external realities within which its external constituency must now effectively operate and thrive. As a result, the organization begins to lose the trust, loyalty, and support of its external constituency and, metaphorically, starts to experience the ravenous onslaught of the seven skinny cows.

When internal and external alignment is lost, the organization (seminary) faces a choice: either adapt or take the road to slow death. Usually, the organization (seminary) can be renewed, re-energized, or made effective again only if some leader is willing to take some big risks by stepping outside the well-defined boundaries and away from the safety net of the organization's (seminary's) standard operating procedures. To bring about deep change, people must "suffer" the risks.

It may be risky to say, but speaking as a part of the LCMS, I am convinced that our seminaries exist, primarily, to facilitate an increase in the number of healthy and flourishing LCMS congregations. In order to have healthy and flourishing LCMS congregations that are able to thrive in the current multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, pluralistic, postmodern secular contexts, each seminary must prepare its students to be leaders who are cross-culturally savvy theologians willing to grapple with cultural diversity, missionaries who measure communication not by what is said but by what is heard, and leaders who, in relationship, serve to lead.

Seminaries can and should be places where leaders of all kinds, and at all different levels of church life, are cultivated to intentionally engage in the mission of God. This means expanding a seminary's online offerings, setting up as many new sites or extension centers as possible, dispersing faculty and staff for seasons of time, and ensuring everyone at a seminary learns to lead and manage an institution that will have a broader footprint.

Traditional means of theological education, especially residential models, are facing extreme challenges. There will always be a place for residential education in forming ministers, missionaries, and scholars for the church, but I've seen, and become convinced, that "learning in ministry" is the best way to raise up and form faithful and fruitful leaders for God's church and His mission.

ENDNOTES

[1] See Peter Steinke, *A Door Set Open* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010), 60–61. Here, Steinke presents a compelling picture of what a healthy and flourishing congregation looks like. He states, "Expansion is not the sole gauge of mission orientation. One problem with this thinking is the belief that, for congregations, all things are equal. But congregations are not in the same place, same stage, or same circumstances. That's not reality. Best-selling author Kathleen Norris talks about her old Presbyterian congregation, Hope Church, in Hope, South Dakota. Both the community of Hope and Hope Church are paradoxes. Although dying, they are, in Norris's words, 'beautifully alive.' The vitality is a result of an unflinching refusal to despair. Due to population depletion, the continuous flight of youth to urban areas, and the sheer isolation geographically, numerical growth is not possible. Despair? According to Norris, the people refuse its presence. The congregation actively participates in reducing world hunger and ranks high in percentage giving among Presbyterians in South Dakota. . . . 'Their challenge is to go on living thankfully, contributing liberally, and living graciously.' Quality

can be a measure of mission, too. Many churches like Hope will not grow. Some are hospice cases. But, not one of them is outside the realm of mission. I want to underscore that growth, as significant as it is for mission, does not alone define what mission is."

[2] Frederick Schmidt, "Is It Time to Write the Eulogy?: The Future of Seminary Education," *Patheos*, 21 March 2011, https://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/03/is-it-time-to-write-the-eulogy-frederick-schmidt-03-21-2011.

[3] Schmidt.

[4] Schmidt.

[5] The "pastors, missionaries, and leaders" that this paper refers to are not three different kinds of church workers but three accurate ways of describing every pastoral candidate that a seminary forms and certifies for ministry. This distinction is important and reflects the "post-church" or "post-Christendom" cultural reality that Christian congregations in North America must now "be the Church" in, and the kind of theological and spiritual leadership they need in order to faithfully and effectively do so.

[6] Jeffrey Miller, "Demographics and Transforming Congregations." *Issues in Christian Education* 45 (Fall 2011): 7.

[7] Terry Tieman, "How Revitalization Can Happen." *Issues in Christian Education* 45 (Fall 2011): 18.

[8] "Christendom" can be rightly seen as a cultural reality and perspective that facilitates the church's posture of supposed cultural hegemony in Western culture.

[9] George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1998), 26.

[10] Barna, 27.

[11] Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1998), 23.

[12] Gibson Winter, "Theological Schools: Partners in the Conversation," in *The Making of Ministers*, ed. Keith R. Bridston and Dwight W. Culver (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1964), 157–158.

[13] Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 6.

[14] Edward Farley, *Theologia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 109.

[15] John C. Hough and John B. Cobb, Jr., *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 17–18.

[16] Lyle E. Schaller, *Reflections of a Contrarian* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 173.

[17] Schaller, 179.

[18] James E. Bradley, "The Nineteenth Century" in *Theological Education in the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. D. G. Hart and R. Albert Mohler, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 167.

[19] Gabriel Fackre, "Educating the Church" in *Theological Education in the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. D. G. Hart and R. Albert Mohler, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 278–279.

[20] Leith, 21.

[21] Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 147.

[22] Linda Cannell, *Theological Education Matters* (Newburgh, IN: EDCOT Press, 2006), 260.

[23] Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 92–93.

[24] Banks, 126.

[25] Banks, 144, italics in the original.

[26] Banks, 172.
[27] Banks, 226–227, italics in the original.
[28] It must be mentioned here that since my time at Concordia, the seminary has worked to expand its "learning-in-ministry" offerings. The Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) program teaches and trains local leaders to serve in specific kinds of local ministries. The Center for Hispanic Studies (CHS) teaches and trains local Spanish speaking pastors for ministry in their unique contexts. The Ethnic Immigrant Institute for Theology (EIIT) forms first-generation ethnic immigrants for ministry in their unique contexts. These "distance," "learning-in-ministry" programs are bearing good fruit. In the Minnesota South District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, just about all of the new ministries and new church starts are being led by students who are enrolled in these "non-traditional" seminary programs. In fact, all the district's truly multi-ethnic congregations are currently being led by EIIT students or graduates!
[29] Linda Cannell, *Theological Education Matters* (Newburgh, IN: EDCOT Press, 2006), 275.
[30] Banks, 61.
[31] Banks, 185
[32] Banks, 185, italics in the original.
[33] The unavoidable choice between deep change and slow death is presented and explicated at length in Robert Quinn, *Deep Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).